

Article

The Lived Experiences of Cluster Foster Parents in Caring for Foster Care Children with Special Needs in Mpumalanga, South Africa

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Abstract: The growing number of children in foster care has often overburdened the foster care system and the social development capacity in South Africa. Cluster foster care is a contemporary and unfamiliar system of foster care in South Africa which emerged, among others, due to the protracted and tedious process of placing children in foster care, in addition to vulnerable children. The increase of children with special needs has also exacerbated the desolate foster care system. That said, the understanding of cluster foster parents particularly those fostering children with special needs has been greatly affected by the dearth of literature and paucity of studies focusing on this domain. Hence the objective of this qualitative study. Through the phenomenological research design and the application of purposive sampling, 15 cluster foster parents were selected to participate in the study. Following some vigorous semi-structured interviews and the subsequent thematic analysis, the findings of the study revealed that cluster foster parents are faced with extreme challenges such as lack of support, knowledge, and limitation of resources in fostering children with special needs. This was worsened by the behavioural challenges exhibited by the challenges with special needs. Further findings revealed that Cluster foster parents continue to struggle to meet the basic needs of foster children in need of care and protection. Consequently, the study recommends the development of empowerment programmes, enhanced support mechanisms and ongoing holistic assessment of cluster foster parents to enable enriching and adequate care of foster children with special needs.

Keywords: Lived experiences; foster care; children; South Africa; foster parents

Introduction

Foster parenting is a global issue that has drawn the attention of different professionals, including social workers (Ciarrochi *et al.*, 2012). South Africa recorded 19, 579 000 cases of foster care placement between the years 2017 and 2022 (Department of Social Development 022). This supports the progress report conducted by the DSD (2022) between the financial years 2016 and 2017, which states that around 478,158 children nationwide have been registered in foster care, and services have been delivered.

Traditionally, in the past decades, extended families assisted as a reliable resource for the care of foster children (Dahl, 2009; Emovon, 2019). However, due to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic, poverty, and domestic violence, among others, extended families are no longer able to properly function as a reliable source for caring for children they used to be reputed for (Tanga, 2017; Van Deventer & Wright, 2017). As a result, many vulnerable and affected children are found without foster care placements amongst their family relatives. Thus, to mitigate this disturbing phenomenon, the South African government has established an alternative strategy of cluster foster parenting (Section 183 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended).

The affliction in caring for foster children leads to several problems such as emotional exhaustion (Warwick, 2013; Mabusela, 2010). This shows that cluster foster parenting is more than just parenting. A cluster foster parent is a parent who has been recruited by a cluster foster care village to care for foster care children in the village (Kadungure, 2017). An integral part of this type of parenting is that cluster foster parents are unique because they do not have an opinion on the children they want to foster. Therefore, they stand a chance of fostering children who are HIV positive, and who are displaying behavioural problems and learning challenges (Mabusela, 2010; Makgato, 2010; Phetlhu & Watson, 2014; Shaik, 2012, Warwick, 2013). Considering the above-mentioned concerns, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of cluster foster parents in caring for children with special needs.

Literature Review

South Africa is commonly considered one of the countries that strongly supports foster care over the institutionalisation of children in need of care and protection. This is where the implementation of residential care upholds the integrity of children by giving them shelter for their well-being. This is supported by the Department of Education (2011) which reveals that there is a focus on the individuality of children and the need to observe their wishes and rights as individuals. Steels and Simpson (2017) found that residential care is an important component of the care system that can influence children's emotional, behavioural, and social development, as well as their mental health and academic success. Even though residential care is the final choice for the care of foster children under Section 150 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005), as amended, cluster foster parenting has emerged as an alternative care strategy in South Africa

1. Historical Background of Foster Care

Children make up 37.3% of South Africa's population, with 7 million of the 18.6 million living in the lowest 20% of households, through the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. It was difficult to determine the precise number of children in need of care and protection because not all of them had been described to the Department of Social Development. However, statistics on foster care grants provided a picture of the scope of children's needs. In 2008, 455,199 children were recorded to be in foster care (Children's Institute, 2015). This figure rose to 512,055 children in 2014 (Children's Institute, 2015). Although the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997a), the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1997), Section 7 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005) as amended, and the White Paper on Families in South Africa (Department of Social Development, 2013) all stated that the family is the basic unit for the care and protection of children (Matthias & Zaal, 2009; Republic of South Africa, 2006.). Based on the previously mentioned facts, the researchers determined that the high percentage of children in the disadvantaged population makes it impossible to record every child in the system.

2. Foster Care in South Africa

In terms of Section 150 of the Children's Act (38 of 2005), as amended, provided circumstances that determine the need to place children who need care and protection and those were; children who have been abandoned, maltreated, neglected, degraded, abused, and suffered for betterment in adulthood stage lives. There were circumstances for children in need of care and protection as mentioned next. According to the Children's Act (38 of 2005), The child needs care and protection if the child:

- i. "has been abandoned or orphaned and is without any visible means of support;
- ii. displays behaviour which cannot be controlled by the parent or caregiver;
- iii. lives or works on the street or begs for a living;
- iv. is addicted to a dependence-producing substance and is without any support to obtain treatment for such dependency;
- v. has been exploited or lives in circumstances that expose the child to exploitation;
- vi. lives in or is exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm that child's physical, mental, or social well-being;

- vii. maybe at risk if returned to the custody of the parent, guardian, or caregiver of the child as there is reason to believe that he or she will live in or be exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm the physical, mental, or social well-being of the child;
- viii. is in a state of physical or mental neglect; or
- ix. is being maltreated, abused, deliberately neglected, or degraded by a parent, caregiver, a person who has parental responsibilities and rights or a family member of the child or by a person under whose control the child is.”

Most studies showed that, in most cases, vulnerable children were in foster care in South Africa due to the death of their parents (Department of Social Development, 2019). The researchers observed the same event in his foster care caseload as a social worker in practice. According to Hall and Sambu (2019), the death of a parent justifies the need for the provision of care and protection for children who are left orphaned and vulnerable. According to Hall and Sambu (2019), roughly fourteen per cent (14%) of South African children are without one or both of their parents. In South Africa, the foster care system placed many foster children at risk because the system failed to meet their needs (Fortune, 2017). The researchers believed that both Hall and Sambu (2019) expressed similar feelings about the foster care placement services provided. The following aspects elaborated on the stance of cluster foster parenting from international to local geographical context.

3. Biopsychosocial Challenges to Cluster Foster Parenting

In South Africa, foster parents cared for abandoned, orphaned, mistreated, and neglected children, as well as vulnerable and at-risk youngsters, in the comfort of their own homes. Foster parents must be dedicated to caring for children with exceptional needs and traumatic backgrounds (Gresham, Hunter, Corwin, & Fisher, 2013). This is because they are projected to provide daily care for the children in place of their parents. Such care duties and responsibilities include performing everyday caregiving tasks such as cooking and feeding, as well as creating a harmless environment and acting as a negotiator and resource link for the development and maintenance of healthy growth and well-being (Blythe, Wilkes & Halcomb, 2013). However, research reveals that fostering these vulnerable children in South Africa and around the world faces substantial obstacles. These difficulties have a significant impact on cluster foster parents, relatives, and the children in their care (Kuo & Operario, 2009). The researchers perceived and agreed with the above authors that it takes courage, love, patience, and passion to care for foster children. Thus, it takes emotional intelligence and a level of maturity of the individual to bargain protection, care, and warmth to the exposed children

4. Theoretical Framework

The current study was underpinned by the Social Development Approach as best described by Midgley (1995), Midgley and Sherraden (2000), Midgley and Tang (2001) and recently by Patel and Schmid (2016). The approach's fundamental premise is that social development is a development of deliberate collective change, and it places special emphasis on the use of indigenous practices and local skills to promote the development of local communities (Du Toit, 2013.). The theoretical framework provided a crucial role in exploring the lived experiences of cluster foster parents which is important to this research study. The theoretical framework the researchers to existing knowledge, resulting in greater clarity and comprehension of the issue under consideration (Moorley & Cathala, 2019). According to Patel (2005), Midgley (1995) and Gray (1998), the social development approach serves as an important instrument and a lens to a planned process of social change to improve the social well-being of the population in conjunction with the development of economic, thus, assuming the lens of the social development approach provided a meticulous overview of cluster foster parenting modalities in South Africa.

Furthermore, this approach was relevant and appropriate in expressing how cluster foster parents return to normalcy after encountering problems. By integrating social and economic growth and investing in human capacities, the social development approach tried to exceed these conceptions (Midgley, 1995; Midgley & Sherraden, 2000; Midgley & Tang, 2001).

In this study, and within the framework of the social development approach characteristics, the implementation of cluster care settings implied that foster children should be cared for within the framework

of an Indigenous model in their communities. Regarding the subject of child and family care, within the framework of the social development approach, the following areas are emphasised

Methodology

1. Research Design

A qualitative research approach was followed in this study. Creswell (2014) states that a qualitative research approach is to understand a person's life involvements from their point of view. The researchers used qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of cluster foster parents in Mhluzi in Middelburg, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. This research approach supported the researchers in comprehending the nature of cluster foster parenting by engaging with cluster foster parents on a face-to-face value. Furthermore, the study was explorative within the ambit of a phenomenological research design. Scwandt (2007) states that phenomenology emerged from the work of Schutz (2019), who explained how the life world of subjects is developed and experienced by them. The phenomenological research design in this study enabled the researchers to investigate the lived experiences of cluster foster parents from their point of view

2. Population and Sample

Furthermore, the population of this study was drawn from cluster foster parents in Mhluzi in Middelburg, Mpumalanga Province. From the population, fifteen (15) cluster foster parents aged between 25-60 years and older who lived in the Mhluzi area were purposively sampled. Only cluster foster parents (CFP) who were caring for foster children through the authority of the children's court and those who live in Mhluzi in Mpumalanga Province contributed to the study. The researchers also included participants who had been cluster foster parents for three years and above. Those chosen cluster foster parents were between the ages of 25 years and above.

3. Data Collection Process

In addition, the researchers used semi-structured interviews, which allowed probing questions to collect data for the study, thereby getting relevant information from participants. This was guided by De Vos et al. (2011), who stated that qualitative studies typically employ semi-structured interviews in a formal setting. The researchers were led by an interview schedule with open-ended questions to guarantee that the interviews remained appropriate to the aim and objectives of the study. Greeff (2011) avers that in-depth interviews are beneficial because they allow participants to explore topics while preventing the researchers from controlling the flow of remarks.

4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed thematically in this study through the help of the NVivo Software. To ensure the quality of the findings, credibility, conformability, transferability, and dependability were followed. Credibility through prolonged engagement, member checking and peer examination was ensured, and field notes were written directly after each interview with each cluster foster parent for auditing purposes to ensure the conformability of the findings. Data was correctly coded for dependability purposes.

Findings

Before the findings are discussed below, a profile of participants and demographic detail is presented to give an exposition of the participants in the study.

1. Profile of Participants

The table below presents demographic data of cluster foster parents, involving 15 participants from Mpumalanga province. The table indicates that the majority of the participants are in the 30-39 age range, constituting 33.33% of the sample. The remaining participants are fairly evenly distributed across the other age ranges. Over half of the participants have completed Grade 12 (53.33%), with a notable portion having some higher education qualifications, including degrees in social work, education, and commerce. The study

is entirely localized to the Mpumalanga province, providing insights specifically from this region. The analysis shows that the cluster foster parents in this study are primarily employed individuals in their 30s and 40s, with a significant number having completed secondary education and some holding higher education degrees. The data suggests a relatively diverse age distribution but a concentrated geographical focus on Mpumalanga. This demographic snapshot helps in understanding the background and potential needs of cluster foster parents in this specific region.

Table 1. Participants demographics

Category	Subcategory	Number of participants (n=15)	Percentage (%)
Age range (in years)	20-29	4	26.67
	30-39	5	33.33
	40-49	2	13.33
	50-59	2	13.33
	60-69	2	13.33
Employment status	Employed	11	73.33
	Unemployed	1	6.67
	Pensioner	3	20.00
Highest qualification	Grade 11	3	20.00
	Grade 12	8	53.33
	Bachelor of Social Work	2	13.33
	Bachelor of Education	1	6.67
	Bachelor of Commerce	1	6.67
Province	Mpumalanga	15	100.00

Source: Manamela, Rapholo and Singwane (2024)

2. Experiences of Cluster Foster Parents Fostering Children with Special Needs

This study found that cluster foster parents experience several problems while fostering children with special needs. Some of the emerging challenges include but are unlimited too, children displaying uncontrollable behaviours, worry and stress of cluster foster parents, a lack of cooperation by foster children's families, a lack of preparation of cluster foster care placement, isolationism of foster children, sexual misconduct of teenage foster children and their silence withdrawal signs

3. Uncontrollable Behaviours by Foster Children with Special Needs

The findings of this study indicated that most of the participants revealed that foster children usually display uncontrollable behaviours, such as being over-clingy, withdrawn, and disobedient. However, Octoman and McLean (2014) postulated that challenges with uncontrollable behavior do not only occur in children with special needs but also with other normal children who are catered to in foster care. This is evident that cluster foster parents, like all foster parents, need support from all relevant stakeholders, including social workers in raising foster children. One cluster foster parent alluded that, the foster children in her care experienced maltreatment from their relatives during the summer, which had an impact on their behaviour. A 55-year-old male social worker, Enoch says:

"I am very stressed with one of my foster children for anything you tell him to do, he just opposes it without even thinking whether it is right or wrong."

In the same breath, 28 years old female Ayanda stated:

"My foster child used to cling to me excessively to such an extent that I ended up beating him because I even found it difficult to do other things or help other children."

In addition, a female Rachel 43 years old echoed that:

“It’s just a behavioral problem, and you have to know how to deal with it. Most of the time, you need to pay special care and attention to how they wake up in the morning and you know how to treat them for the rest of the day. They will have certain things like we have one boy who cries a lot.”

In the same breath, the other female Busisiwe 36 years old echoed that:

“My two foster children are beginning to show less interest in me every time I communicate with them and at a later stage, their case manager (Social Worker) indicated that this child was sexually abused by family relatives and there is an investigation going on.”

The above findings show that foster children with special needs display uncontrollable behaviours in their foster homes. However, according to the findings, it must be noted that some of these uncontrollable behaviours are possibly caused by certain incidents that children went or go through, for instance, abuse that children experience from their relatives during their early developmental stage of childhood upbringings. This is in line with Warwick (2016), who says that foster children with special needs present uncontrollable behaviours such as swinging moods daily because of abuse. Similarly, Corso (2008); Draper, (2008) and Gould (2012) posit that abuse which includes physical, sexual, psychological, and neglect, has a wide variety of harmful effects on physical and mental health in children. In support of the above authors, a study by Legano, Desch, Messner, Idzerda, Flaherty, and Yin, (2021), elaborated that not all debilitating conditions carry the same risk of abuse or neglect, it is now possible to determine which children with disabilities are more vulnerable to maltreatment. It can be noted that any type of abuse has the potential to impact children negatively at any developmental stage.

4. Lack of Funds to Care for Foster Children with Special Needs

Further findings indicated that most of the participants articulated that financial constraints are concerning for them in that they are unable to perform their parental role in caring for their foster children with special needs. For instance, the Department of Social Development in South Africa only provides foster grants that amount to R 1050.00 for each foster child every month. According to the participants, the grants are insufficient to enable them to meet the essential needs of children such as food, clothing, and transportation of children to school (Mabusela, 2010). The cluster foster parents further indicated that their stipend for fostering these children is insufficient to meet the basic needs of foster children with special needs. A 33-year-old male social worker Thapelo explained that:

“My experience with children with special needs is a challenge because you find that a child needs a lot of attention, the time you must spend with that child and at the end of the day, it depends on the nature of the disability. You find that you have 5 children who need your attention too. For instance, a child will request a lot of medication, and money to cover such expensive medication”

In the same breath, a female teacher Refiloe 45 years old says:

“Children with special needs will tell you that they need extra special care, need good nutrition, need to collect their medication from the hospitals because of their disorders, and their moods and behaviours change frequently. We also have children with mental disorders. Some have autism, bipolar”

These findings reveal that cluster foster parents encounter financial difficulties in raising foster children with special needs and they are unable to meet all the basic needs of such children and their needs as persons. This is in line with the finding that a lack of funding brings confusion to cluster foster parents as foster children usually require specialized service care (Mire & McNaughton, 2018). It can be deduced from the findings that due to such financial difficulties; cluster foster parents are more likely to use their funds to raise foster children and that is equally most likely to compromise the well-being of their households. This can demotivate cluster parents who are needed when such cases arise.

5. Lack of Preparedness before Caring for Children with Special Needs

Some cluster foster parents indicated that they were unprepared thoroughly to care for foster children before the placement and that this makes their lives difficult, for example, when a transition occurs about a foster child being transferred from his or her current respective home into a new cluster placement home. Patel (2005) demonstrates that most cluster foster parents face difficulties in caring for foster children because of a variety of factors, including inadequate preparation to care for such children, resulting in negative placement outcomes. In addition to this, cluster foster parents may encounter challenges of foster children with conditions such as being physically and cognitively challenged, children being rejected by family members or those who have speech delays (Children's Institute, 2015). One of the participants Gugu, a 28-year-old female stated:

“Being a cluster foster parent requires social workers to explain to us the backgrounds of these children. We need to understand the needs of such children. At times, they don't listen; you cannot talk to them as they act strangely. I have to take them as my children.”

“I encountered too much confusion because it is difficult to deal with these children. We need preparation and understanding of how we can assist or respond to their actions. These children give us tough times indeed.”

The findings of this study reveal that cluster foster parents find it difficult to care for foster children with special needs due to a lack of preparation by social workers. If prospective cluster foster parents could have a background of the prospective foster child, then it would enable the prospective cluster foster parents to prepare in advance and adequately- care for such children. It is challenging for cluster foster parents to satisfy the needs of foster children while also ensuring their well-being and healthy growth (Hlabiango & Ogunbanjo, 2009; Tanga, Khumalo & Gutura, 2017). In line with the above authors, Schofield and Ward (2008) concur that social workers should be engaged in the placement of children in foster care up until the foster child reaches the age of majority. Social workers should not close the chapter of placement after the presiding officer/magistrate has issued a court order to the cluster foster parents but should continue providing support to the approved cluster foster parent and the children concerned.

6. Support Systems for Cluster Foster Parents

Most of the participants receive support from placement social workers, religion (church) and family members, the Department of Social Development and NGOs. Most of the participants indicated that social workers, religion, family, NGOs, and the Department of Social Development frequently provide various kinds of support services in assisting the cluster foster parents with the placement process of foster children.

Support from Social Workers

It was revealed that social workers provide guidance and facilitation about the aspects of the foster care placement process, and they also monitor the development of children every month. Another, male 38 years old Godfrey stated that.

“Our area social workers visit us every month to provide us with guidance and counselling, as well as behavior modification of children who display uncontrollable behavior”

These findings detail that it is the responsibility of social workers to create rapport with cluster foster parents and conduct home visits frequently or quarterly to monitor the placement and provide a support structure. Statutory social work intervention focuses on, among other things, supporting and strengthening individuals (cluster foster parents) who require residential or alternative care (Republic of South Africa, 2006). When social workers constantly pay regular visits to respective and mandated cluster foster parents, this appears as a sign of a support system on a professional and development level.

Support from the Department of Social Development and NGOs

Findings show that most of the participants indicated that they receive support from NGOs and the Department of Social Development. The Department of Social Development provides foster grants every month as well as blankets and food parcels occasionally. A 69-year-old female Christina echoed that:

“We depend on NGOs for support, including resources such as toys, books, bottles, blankets, and food”

In the same wavelength, a 60-year-old female Maria stated:

“We try to get support from different companies, sponsors, government, and private institutions time and again. We appreciate their assistance”

It is evident from the study that the above support systems, including social workers, the Department of Social Development, NGOs, private sectors, and churches, should be used holistically as they all have a positive impact on cluster foster parents as far as support is concerned. Martin (2010) agrees that community committees are community-based institutions that focus on the needs of the community's people and ensure that those needs are met. The researcher believes that all these different support systems should be used frequently to motivate cluster foster parents, hence improving the quality of cluster foster care.

Support from Church

Moreover, findings show that all the participants highlighted their respective religious gatherings which helped them a lot in coping with their day-to-day challenges. Churches were considered the most helpful form of support and comfort among cluster foster parents. In line with this, a corresponding study conducted by Makoe et al. (2008) shows that religion is one of the most used coping mechanisms that cluster foster parents depend on.

It can be noted that religion has a significant impact on caring experiences. Any support system like prayer which emerges from religious organizations towards foster parenting is particularly viewed as a strong coping mechanism. The researcher believes that the term “prayer” is regarded as a powerful spiritual tool used by cluster foster parents to exercise spiritual matters that produce a long-suffering, patient, and coping ability to cluster parenting. Therefore, churches play an important role in foster care placements. A 31-year female Tshepo stated that:

“When I am going through tough times, I invite my church pastor to come and pray for me and usually, the situation changes for the better after praying to God.”

In the same wavelength, 27-year-old male Lesego echoed that.

“I pray daily when I wake up and ask God to help me face the challenges boldly because I know that no weapon formed against me will prosper.”

In the same breath, 52 years old female Jabu stated:

“Things have changed; we no longer receive enough support. It happened previously. We used to get it from various churches. Recently, we had support from social workers but is not enough, sometimes I can see that those social workers may be too busy. I just think that some social workers do not do enough, or maybe it's because of their management rules or authorities.”

According to a Canadian study by Daniel (2011), foster parents are highly motivated to care because of empathy and personal experiences with alternative care. In a similar study by McDermid, Holmes, Kirton and Signoretta (2012) in the United Kingdom, it was found that cluster foster parents believed they had something to offer youngsters in comparable situations since they had encountered such conditions themselves.

However, one of the participants mentioned that they no longer receive support or prayer as a strength-giving tool, unlike previously. Rodlach (2009) affirms that studies in African contexts, such as in Zimbabwe, found that cluster foster parents are highly driven by a religious value mostly reflected in the need to care for the poor and less fortunate, as well as by personal experiences. Even in severely stressful situations, religion can bring a sense of relaxation and calm (Aldwin, 2007). The researchers add that choice of religion has an

impact on cluster foster parents and most children who grew up in cluster placements at some point had better results because of the religious value system.

Discussion

From the findings of the study, it is evident that cluster foster parents face significant challenges due to the uncontrollable behaviours exhibited by children with special needs. These behaviours include excessive clinginess, withdrawal, disobedience, and even aggression. These findings are corroborated by Mayfield (2021) who argued that foster children who enter the system with a history of trauma often do so with several mental health and behavioural health issues that make it harder for parents. The emotional and physical toll on foster parents compounds the stress from managing these behaviours. The narratives from the participants in the study underscore the intensity and variety of these challenges, highlighting how past trauma, such as abuse, exacerbates behavioural issues, as also attested by the study by Mayfield (2021). Moreover, the findings of the study showed a prevalence of lack of cooperation from biological families which ultimately pose a challenge for foster parents. These findings are also attested by Schoemaker et al. (2020) who averred that in instances where a child is removed from biological parents to cluster parents, the lack of cooperation can pose serious challenges to the foster care process. This can manifest in various ways, such as resistance to foster care arrangements or interference with the child's adjustment to their new environment. The lack of support from biological families adds to the emotional burden on foster parents (Schoemaker et al., 2020).

Further findings in the study revealed that many foster parents report feeling unprepared for the realities of caring for children with special needs. This lack of preparation is linked to insufficient background information provided by social workers and inadequate training on handling specific needs and behaviours. These findings are consistent with the findings of Mallette et al. (2020) who posited that foster parents need to be adequately prepared to cope with the additional responsibilities, thus foster caregivers should be capacitated with social support, training, and other capacity building. These assertions by Mallette et al. (2020) are important since this study also revealed that foster parents sometimes also have to deal with issues of misconduct and isolation. This present study argues that without adequate training and preparation, foster parents may not be able to provide proper parenting and navigate through various parental challenges.

To augment this, the study further indicates that uncontrollable behaviours often stem from past traumas, including various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, psychological) and neglect. Research by Warwick (2016), Corso (2008), Draper (2008), and Gould (2012) support the connection between abuse and behavioural issues. These behaviours are not exclusive to children with special needs but are more pronounced and challenging to manage in this group. The findings emphasize the necessity for robust support from social workers and mental health professionals. Continuous professional support can help foster parents develop effective strategies to manage behaviours and provide the necessary care and attention.

In the same vein, the researchers in the study found that there is insufficient financial support for cluster parents, and this was a major concern for effective foster parenting. This study upholds the conclusions by Huscroft-D'Angelo et al. (2022), who shared the sentiments of the study and argued that financial challenges hinder appropriate cluster foster parenting. Despite the efforts by the Government to offer stipends to cluster foster parents, this is often inadequate to cover the special needs of these children, including medical care, therapy, and specialized education. Moreover, as attested by Huscroft-D'Angelo et al. (2022) the financial strain not only affects the care provided to the children but also impacts the foster parents' own households.

Contrastingly, Sharda (2022) argued that foster parents frequently encounter a mismatch between the support they received and the support needed. This present study found that social workers play a crucial role in the support system for foster parents. Furthermore, the study notably found that social workers provide guidance, counselling, and behaviour modification strategies. Strategies such as regular visits and consistent communication help build rapport and trust, which are essential for effective foster care. Some financial pressures on foster parents. The study further concurs with the findings by Mallette et al. (2020) that religious institutions such as churches provide emotional and spiritual support, which is highly valued by foster parents.

In the denouement, it is argued that the major challenge that cluster foster parents battle with is the lack of proper and adequate knowledge in dealing with and caring for children with special needs. Although they are expected to pay more attention despite the difficult circumstances they are confronted with in daily

activities. These findings are corroborated by various authors (Malette et al., 2020; Mayfield, 2021; Schoemaker et al., 2020) . Hence, the goal of cluster parenting should remain central for all practitioners involved in cluster foster parenting.

Conclusion

The study underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by cluster foster parents caring for children with special needs. Behavioural issues, financial constraints, lack of preparedness, and the need for robust support systems are recurring themes. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach involving continuous support from social workers, adequate financial assistance, comprehensive training, and leveraging community and religious support systems. By improving these areas, the well-being of both foster children and foster parents can be significantly enhanced, leading to more successful and stable foster care placements.

Despite the present study's attempts to describe the lived experiences of cluster foster parents, the results of the study cannot be generalized to a larger population of cluster foster parents, due to the limited cluster foster parents in the study. Thus, a study covering a larger sample would be useful to extrapolate on the general views held by cluster foster parents, beyond Mpumalanga. Furthermore, further research on social workers' experiences in the placement of cluster foster parents would yield further evidence in clarifying the challenges outlined in this study.

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